

The Unseen Cost

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What does a piece of steel wool cost? It depends on if you carelessly toss it into the CHT system. During USS *Harry S. Truman*'s maiden deployment, one Sailor's carelessness turned a normal day into a stinker for many Sailors.

It began as another fine Navy day for AIMD's fire-control-radar workcenter. The day shift still had three hours to go, and the day had so far been

quite productive. About 1600, an HT1 knocked on our door to inform us he had to open a clogged drainpipe in the back of the shop. The pipe channeled sewage from eight heads and the forward officers' wardroom—all were located on the 02 and 03 levels directly above our workcenter.

Not wanting any of yesterday's chow floating around our deck, we prepared the shop with a makeshift dam and crossed our fingers as a crew



of HTs removed a two-foot section of pipe--the removal was followed by a flood of waste water and raw sewage pouring onto the deck. The HTs valiantly stood their ground and fought back, containing the small spill within a 10-by-10-foot-piece of real estate. Even though we now had about 6 inches of sewage on our deck and nothing more than smell now came out of the pipe, everybody thought all was well. Boy, were we ever wrong!

Thinking they had contained the spill, one HT stuck his hand into the pipe to remove the cause of the blockage: a steel wool pad. Then the proverbial you-know-what really hit the fan and everything else in the workcenter. A tidal wave of 90 gallons of raw sewage blew apart the makeshift dam and spread across the shop. Within seconds, everything on the deck was contaminated, and everyone was scampering for high ground.

We immediately called for emergency reclamation and began cleaning the mess. Twelve hours later, everything was sanitized, and paperwork was completed. The cost to the shop was a loss of 235.8 production man-hours, a lost jeweler's screwdriver, and an airman requiring hepatitis shots after being stuck with a contaminated safety wire during cleanup. The cost could have been much higher since we had 25 pieces of equipment valued at \$9.2 million in the path of the imperfect storm. Amazingly, shop personnel remained in good spirits throughout the evolution and functioned as a team. They would need that positive attitude to get through what was to happen within the next couple of days.

After cleanup, shop personnel kicked it up a notch and almost caught up all work that had piled up because of the spill.

Meanwhile, two days after the disaster, the HT1 again appeared at our shop door with his pipe-cutting tools in hand. To say the shop was not happy to see him would be an understatement. Many hours had been spent on emergency reclamation, cleanup and sanitation, and the shop was not looking forward to going through it again.

To limit the amount of potential contamination while opening the second pipe, the shop palletized and removed more than 90 pieces of gear and applied barrier paper over bulkheads, shelves, and over the radar-set test station. We also lifted everything off the deck throughout the shop, and we built a dam to contain anything that might come out of the pipe. We then built a second dam behind the first, for any possible overflow. Seven bales of rags were also on hand to soak up any spill that got past the two dams.

The HTs decided to try a different approach when opening the pipe this time. Instead of just removing bolts and yanking out the pipe, they went higher on the pipe and opened a clean-out port to bleed off excess water or whatever they were able to bleed. While removing the clean-out port, one HT was blasted in the face with recycled breakfast. The jokes were unmerciful and in very poor taste.

After this first glitch in the HTs' plan, everything appeared to be going OK, then water began to appear outside the dam. After inspecting the dam, we discovered water was seeping under the tape holding the barrier paper to the bulkhead and running behind a test station,


spreading across the entire shop.

After the clog was cleared, we again cleaned the mess and sanitized the shop. The medical department inspectors then determined it fit for human habitation.

I never knew how much a steel-wool pad could cost. This particular one cost the shop 589 production hours and could have cost millions of dollars had the sewage not been contained.

Although cleanup was labor- and time-intensive and generally unpleasant, shop morale remained high. Our unfortunate airman completed his hepatitis-shot series, and we all got used to hearing jokes about having the "crappiest" workcenter in the department.

This entire fiasco could have been prevented simply by not throwing anything into the CHT system that does not belong there.

Nonetheless, always be prepared for the worst. 

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